If we can’t feel or see this imaginary stuff, no problem exists, Ms. Kangaroo huffs. But Horton, an elephant of great girth, was certain he heard cries from a teeny tiny earth.

“That finally, at last! Their voices were heard! They’ve proved they are here, no matter how small.”

And so little Whos of Whoville were saved by someone who believed in their right to remain. Their world on a dust speck was clearly in tatters, till Horton proclaimed: “EVERY VOICE MATTERS!”

In Theodor Geisel’s (a.k.a. Dr. Seuss) fabled tale, Horton the elephant hears pleas for help on a dust speck lodged in a clover. Hollywood’s version of “Horton Hears A Who” paints an animated universe strangely like our own. No one in the jungle trusts the goofy pachyderm because, as Kangaroo warns: You cannot believe in something you can’t see or touch.

Horton defies the code of the jungle to speak for creatures without a voice. This reminded me of animals in society. Specifically, my mind drifted to the cows.

As a rule, we don’t hear much about cows. California’s Milk Advisory Board assures us they are “Happy Cows,” who “make a ton of other delicious dairy products!”

In a Horton-esque twist, cows became news with the release of a video from Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) in February 2008. The footage, shot over six weeks in 2007, shows how Westland/Hallmark Meat Company mistreated sick cows trucked in from industrialized dairies. After HSUS gave their video to the San Bernardino County District Attorney’s Office, two workers at the Chino, Calif.-based plant were booked on possibly the nation’s first felony charges for animal abuse at a slaughterhouse. So far, none of their superiors face prosecution.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture banned “downed cattle” from entry into the human food chain after the 2003 discovery of a Washington state downer with mad cow disease. Still, close to a half million infirm cows are annually dragged to slaughter, a JAVMA report predicts. Each nonambulatory animal is worth about $30 in hamburger revenue. Big dairy operations account for 90-95% of downed cows, asserts Temple Grandin, an animal science professor at Colorado State University who considers 75% of cases preventable with humane care.

In the HSUS video, Hallmark employees electrically shock the heads, necks, spines and rectums of disabled cows. Former pen manager Daniel Navarro paddles a listless cow in the face and eye. The men hoist cows on forklift prongs and roll their giant bodies over pavement. They fire concentrated water jets into the cows’ nostrils and throats.
I’D NEVER HEARD A COW SCREAM LIKE THAT BEFORE. “One cow is down on the truck when she arrives,” the investigator recounts. “Workers shock her from behind, but she’s too weak to stand. A chain is attached to her leg and she’s dragged with a forklift. As she’s pushed along concrete, you can see it causes her so much pain…A worker drives over her leg and face with the wheels of the forklift. I’d never heard a cow scream like that before.”

By itself, Hallmark footage is unremarkable. The breaking news is that it took a guy with a pen camera fastened to his shirt button to reveal that downers — those most likely to test positive for bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) or mad cow disease — easily become dinner. Among 15 confirmed BSE cases in North America, at least 12 were downers. Impaired cows also harbor more E. coli and Salmonella contamination.

The investigator toiled 12-hour days, at $8 an hour, herding cows down chutes to the kill floor. In an anonymous phone interview, he told the Los Angeles Times he observed “brutalization of animals too weak or sick to walk to slaughter. It was so in-your-face. As cows are making their final steps, there’s no USDA personnel objecting to this behavior.”

His findings prompted a recall of 143,383,823 pounds of beef on 2/7/08. Hallmark, a partner of Westland Meat, lost its USDA contract to furnish beef for America’s School Lunch Program. Food Safety Inspection Service (FSIS) suspended its audits, in effect closing the plant. The Office of the Inspector General subpoenaed proof for the Justice Department to pursue criminal prosecution.

It was a whistle-blower’s triumph, as if Horton himself had roused sleeping bureaucrats: “The video, the cows, the people…how true! Hence forth, Kangaroo JUSTICE FOR ALL!”

WHY DO WE NEED A DOWNER LAW? OUR “RULE” ALREADY SERVES JUSTICE FOR ALL! The Downed Animal Protection Act sets an enforceable industry-wide ban on the transport, marketing and slaughter of all downed animals (not just cows). The Farm Animal Stewardship Purchasing Act requires government-contracted producers to comply with basic humane policies, such as merciful euthanasia for downers. Neither bill has seen much movement beyond committee hearings. Secretary Schafer believes a downer law is unnecessary. The U.S. Senate lets politics trump mercy, again rejecting a measure to ban non-ambulatory cattle in Sept. 2008.

Perhaps, but it’s a gamble. Nonprofit humane groups — not federal watchdogs — expose most animal welfare and food security breaches. Westland/Hallmark is not a first-time offender. In 1993, the animal protection organization Farm Sanctuary filmed Hallmark workers shoving cows with forklifts. Two California groups uncovered 11 verified instances of abuse at Hallmark between 1996 and 2004. USDA cited Hallmark for violations such as “too much electric prodding” in 2005. After the video story broke, USDA found Hallmark had killed cows forced upright for pre-slaughter inspection since February 2006.

This all happened under USDA radar, despite the agency’s 2003 injunction on downed cows for human consumption. In 2005 another mad cow emerged in Texas, further validating a link to the Hallmark debacle. “It’s the inevitable outcome of a system in which animal abuse and health concerns are predictable by-products of following the prime directive — maximizing profit — in a context of inadequate oversight,” Anna Lappé writes in Largest Beef Recall, Ever. Now, Real Change? for the Huffington Post.

Meanwhile the “one who goes down” languishes in manure, some-times for days, as she awaits inspection. From an industry standpoint, “image will improve, both domestically and in export markets…if downers are prevented and when a nonambulatory condition does occur, put down on the farm,” writes foodborne-illness lit-igator Bill Marler in The Raw Economics Driving the Use of Downers.

From a social perspective, one wonders if cheap meat is really worth its cost in inhumanity. The cows found their Horton in a Humane Society investigator. Now, can anyone else hear them?